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ABSTRACT

The Teachers as Readers (TAR) Project is a national program which helps teachers encourage children to become lifelong readers. TAR began as a pilot program in the state of Virginia in Spring 1992 as the Reading Initiative sponsored by the American Association of Publishers and the Virginia State Reading Association. The first TAR Project in Orange County, California was developed in spring 1993 in one Fullerton elementary school. The group included 10 members who met 6 times on a regularly determined schedule during 1 semester to discuss a total of 12 children's books and to keep response journals. Criteria for selection of books for TAR groups include: each original hardcover edition was reviewed and recommended in "The Horn Book Magazine"; each paperback costs less than $10; one-half of the books are targeted for student in grade K-3, the other half in grades 4-6; and picture books are given special consideration because those published in the 1990s meet the interest levels of most students. All participants maintain response journals in which they record reactions and questions in preparation for discussion of the reading material. Readers agree that the two key factors in beginning a successful TAR group are: (1) the inclusion of the building administrator as an active participant of the group; and (2) the careful choice of a facilitator who selects books prudently and is knowledgeable in the field of newly published children's literature. (RS)

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# INTRODUCING THE TEACHERS AS READERS (TAR) PROJECT:

## AN ELEMENTARY PERSPECTIVE

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The Teachers as Readers Project is a national program which helps teachers encourage children to become lifelong readers. Its goal is to demonstrate that when teachers and students read quality literature with confidence and pleasure, classrooms become richly literate environments.

TAR began as a pilot in the state of Virginia in Spring 1992 as the Reading Initiative under the sponsorship of the American Association of Publishers and in cooperation with the Virginia State Reading Association. In 36 school districts across the state nearly 400 classroom teachers, librarians, principals, school board members, superintendents and parents met regularly to talk about the children's books which they had selected. All groups were required to have the building principals as active, participating members and the strategy paid off: By the end of the pilot 74% of the principals increased their next year's budget for children's books by an average of 30%! The director of the AAP Reading Initiative, Mary Sue Dillingofski, noted that in times of recession, layoffs, and budget cuts it was heartening to learn that support for children's books in the classroom can come from principals who have rekindled an interest in books for young readers.

After that pilot project--and the Virginia groups all voted to continue participation--the Teachers as Readers Project received the endorsement of the International Reading Association and the American Library Association. And within the last year the National Council of Teachers of English, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children have joined the ranks of promoters.

The first TAR project in Orange County, California (with its 28 public school districts enrolling more than 600,000 students) was developed by the writer for Spring 1993 in one Fullerton elementary school. It followed several guidelines established by the AAP

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Reading Initiative and the VSRA:

1. The group included 10 members who met six times on a regularly determined schedule during one semester.
2. The group consisted of eight teachers, one principal, and one community member (such as a librarian, a parent, or a school board member). (We had the president of the local school board, who is also a retired teacher.)
3. The group read and discussed at least four children's books with all the members reading the same books. (We read twelve books.)
4. Participants kept response journals.
5. The group had a facilitator or organizer who promoted good discussions and handled the necessary paperwork and book distribution. (The writer served as facilitator and developed criteria for the selection of books for the TAR group.)

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF BOOKS
FOR TEACHERS AS READERS GROUPS

1. Each book is a NEW BOOK, having been originally published in the more expensive hardcover edition during the 1990's.
2. Each of the original hardcover editions has been reviewed in The Horn Book Magazine, considered by many to be the most prestigious journal of literature for children and young people in the country, and known to be in continuous existence since the 1920s. Some have even earned a starred review, as they have been rated as the best of their genre published recently.
3. Each of the paperback editions has also been specifically recommended by The Horn Book Magazine.
4. The price of each paperback edition runs under $10.00, ranging from approximately $3.00 to $8.00, minus the usual bulk or institutional discount of 20%.
5. Each semester a variety of genres is represented during the six sessions, including non-fiction informational, non-fiction biographical, contemporary realistic fiction, poetry, folklore, historical fiction, and picture books.
6. Each semester a number of award-winning authors or author-illustrators is represented as writing the chosen selections, including Russell Freedman, Barbara Cooney, Beverly Cleary, Eve Bunting, Mary Stolz, Gail Gibbons, and Faiteh Ringgold for Spring 1994.

7. Among the 12 selections there is an effort to offer:
   a. some balance between male and female characters.
   b. an avoidance of stereotypes.
   c. age-appropriate discussion of such topics as death, physical handicaps, war, and homelessness.
   d. accurate and current data in book of non-fiction.
   e. cultural diversity.
   f. chapter books with high interest and low-vocabulary to meet the needs of older but less proficient readers and ESL students.
8. One-half of the books each semester is especially targeted for students in grades 1-3 or K-3: the other half for students in grades 4-6. In this way each session of the TAR group includes discussion of one book particularly appealing to younger students or less proficient readers and one book for older students or intermediate readers.
9. Picture books receive special consideration because those published in the 1990's meet the interest levels of most students in the elementary grades (and not merely school beginners). They even qualify for children's comments in response journals.

## RESPONSE JOURNALS

All participants maintain response journals which can consist of any form of bound, lined or unlined paper. Readers can write in a composition book, a spiral notebook, or any other book or booklet. Entries should be kept together in a chronological order so these can be reviewed and discussed.

Response journals are places to record reactions and questions, not places to simply summarize what has been read. Readers should write as they read or else return to the book while writing. Looking back and copying phrases or sentences from the text also helps readers better understand what they have read and how it shaped their reactions.

Response journals are open-ended so there is no right answer or proper topic to write about and no particular form that the responses must take. Writers should focus on meaning, not mechanics as this is informal, unedited writing.

Personal preferences and characteristics influence how readers respond to a book.

Perhaps even more significant than individual personalities are the effects of readers' sociocultural backgrounds. Sociocultural norms are so deeply ingrained in all of us from birth that we are generally unaware of our own assumptions and expectations. Yet these norms are central to the way that readers use response journals and therefore we have to develop awareness and appreciation for differences among readers in the TAR groups.

Response journals should reveal engagement in reading. And one sign of such engagement is questioning. When readers ask questions, they are showing that they care about what things mean. When the facilitator asks questions (preferably in advance of the reading), she or he is promoting written reactions in response journals. Sample questions likely to be posed could include one or more of the following:

1. Give your opinion of the book supported by details from the text and/or illustrations.
2. Integrate story/information with other areas of the curriculum.
3. Since picture books can be used at various age levels (including adult), cite possible age groups with whom the book could be used and then tell how you would choose to use it.
4. Would the book be effective as a read-aloud? If so, at which grade level would you share it orally with girls and boys?
5. How is the book relevant to the lives of students at.....School?
6. Can you recall other appropriate titles related to the book under discussion due to similarity of settings, issues, characters, etc.? List authors too if possible.

Consequently whether it is the facilitator or the readers themselves who ask or answer the questions about the books, response journals can be used in either case to prepare for a hearty discussion of the reading material. They may even be used as a reference during TAR sessions.

## FORMING A TEACHERS AS READERS GROUP

The project has the potential, according to Dillingofski, to encourage educators to use children's trade books more widely in the classroom as well as to model the kind of in-depth book discussions that promote a love of literature. Some participants even claim that it is an antidote to teacher burnout! For more information on starting a Teachers as

Readers group in your school, contact either of the following:

Mary Sue Dillingofski, Director
AAP Reading Initiative
Association of American Publishers
220 E. 23rd Street
New York 10010

Susan Roman, Executive Director
Association for Library Service to Children
American Library Association
50 E. Huron St.
Chicago, 60611

Readers agree that the two key factors in beginning a successful TAR group are (1) the inclusion of the building administrator as an active participant of the group (as school budgets are a perpetual problem) and (2) the careful choice of a facilitator who selects books prudently and is knowledgeable in the highly demanding field of newly published children's literature.